

News Release

Taking Count of the Western Prairie Fringed Orchid; Census currently underway in Minnesota

By ltollefs on Monday, July 11, 2011

Since early July, volunteers have been out on the Minnesota prairie taking a very special census of a threatened prairie wildflower. The prairie fringed orchid has been on the U.S. List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants since 1989, and the annual census gives researchers important data necessary in the protection of the delicate orchid and its habitat.

Under the direction of Nancy Sather, botanist and the statewide orchid count coordinator, volunteers are out all over the state of Minnesota gathering data. Dan Svedarsky, director of the Center for Sustainability at the U of M, Crookston and research biologist with the Northwest Research and Outreach Center along with seniors Kristine Neu, Pelican Rapids, Minn., a double major in horticulture and communication; Ben Sullivan, Crookston, Minn.; and GreenCorps member Michael Knudson, Glencoe, Minn., both majoring in natural resources, recently assisted with the census at the Pankratz Prairie located 11 miles southeast of Crookston and owned by The Nature Conservancy.



"We are always working to better understand the threats and environmental factors affecting the flowering cycle of species like the prairie fringed orchid," Svedarsky explains. "We will be hosting a coordinating meeting on the Crookston campus on July 20 regarding this annual census and on-going research. This information is critical to protecting the prairie orchid. ; Polk County happens to be one of the hot spots for the orchid in our state."



The orchid's population has fluctuated over the years. Across 43 sites in Minnesota the count had declined steadily from 2001 to 2006. The plants prefer moist soil and warm temperatures, but like to grow on the higher side of ditches or hollows. The most common threats to the orchids are habitat destruction including the conversion of land for agricultural purposes, conversion of lands for housing or commercial uses, herbicide drift, and spread of invasive species.

"One of the places providing the perfect growing conditions for the orchid is near Glacial Ridge Project on the tallgrass prairie landscape of the Pembina Trail Preserve," says Svedarsky. "The Glacial Ridge Project, located 10 miles east of campus, is one of the largest wetland and prairie restoration projects in North America."

The prairie fringed orchid attracts hawk moths that feed on the nectar and transfer pollen from flower to flower and plant to plant according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Web site (www.fws.gov). Pollination can be influenced by timing of the flowering, availability of other flowering species for the hawk moth, and the range of the pollinator in relation to the orchid populations. To learn more about the prairie fringed orchid, visit www.iucnredlist.org.



Today the University of Minnesota, Crookston delivers 29 bachelor's degree programs, 18 minors, and more than 40 concentrations, including several online degrees, in the areas of agriculture and natural resources; business; liberal arts and education; and math, science and technology. With an enrollment of about 1,400 undergraduates from more than 25 countries and 40 states, the Crookston campus offers a supportive, close-knit atmosphere that leads to a prestigious University of Minnesota degree. "Small Campus. Big Degree." To learn more, visit www.umcrookston.edu.

In the photos:
Top, right:

Ben Sullivan (center), a Shaver Environmental Landscaping intern working with the Northwest Research and Outreach Center, holding a Trimble GPS unit which is used to plot the precise location of the endangered plant in the foreground; Michael Knudson (left), a Minnesota GreenCorps stormwater management specialist working with the Center for Sustainability; and Kristine Neu (right), who is working with the Connecting Children to Nature in Northwest project this summer. Photo by Dan Svedarsky.

Bottom, left and right: Western Prairie Fringed Orchid on the Pankratz Prairie near Crookston, Minn. Photos by Ben Sullivan.

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2900 University Ave., Crookston, MN 56716
800-862-6466 | 218-281-6510 | umcinfo@umn.edu
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